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ABSTRACT

Given recent research that encourages more frequent use of the discussion method in teaching, this digest reviews the role of instructional conversations (ICs) in second language learning. ICs, instructional in content and conversational in quality, offer natural and spontaneous language interactions that are free from the didactic characteristics normally associated with formal teaching. ICs also are more in line with a shift toward a "constructivist" curriculum with students expected to actively construct their own knowledge and understanding, and with the teacher playing a role as facilitator of learning. Elements important in the IC model are as follows: thematic focus; activization and use of background and relevant schemata; direct teaching; promotion of more complex language and expressions; promotion of bases for statements or positions; fewer "known-answer" questions; responsiveness to student contributions; connected discourse; challenging, but non-threatening, atmosphere; and general participation, including self-selected turns. ICs appear to be particularly suited to certain educational goals, such as analysis of literary or historical themes, learning and understanding complex concepts, mathematical reasoning, applying quantitative understandings, considering various perspectives on issues, and oral or written composition. Contains 12 references. (LB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
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Digest

August 1992

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Instructional Conversations

(EDO-FL-92-01)

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

This Digest is based on a report published by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, University of California, Santa Cruz, titled, *Instructional Conversations and their Classroom Application*, by Claude Goldenberg. The report contains transcripts of original instructional conversations. Copies are available for $4.00 from Center for Applied Linguistics, NCRCDSLL, 1118 22nd St. NW, Washington, DC 20037.

Since the time of Socrates, educators have advocated a type of teaching that does more than impart knowledge and teach skills. Such teaching would help students use their knowledge and skills to understand, appreciate, and grapple with important ideas as they develop a depth of understanding for a wide range of issues and questions. Yet teaching aimed at these important goals is often absent from U.S. classrooms.

Too often, classrooms reflect the "recitation script" model of instruction. Typically, a teacher initiates an interaction by asking a question, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates the response (Mehan, 1979). This type of classroom interaction is especially prevalent in classrooms with low-income minority children. Recent research indicates that limited-English-proficient (LEP) students, in particular, are very likely to experience inadequate cognitive and language learning environments in school. The following was reported in a U.S. Department of Education-sponsored national study:

> Direct observations reveal that teachers do most of the talking in classrooms, making about twice as many utterances as do students....In over half of the interactions that teachers have with students, students do not produce any language....When students do respond, typically they provide only simple information recall statements. This pattern of teacher/student interaction not only limits a student's opportunity to create and manipulate language freely, but also limits the student's ability to engage in more complex learning. (Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991, p.8)

Contemporary researchers, however, have encouraged more frequent use of the discussion method. Wilen (1990) argues that class discussions that are educative, reflective, and structured promote critical thinking, engage students in productive social interaction, and let them assume responsibility for their own learning. Scholars of classroom language have advocated shifting from recitation to more "real discussion" or classroom "talk in which ideas are explored rather than answers to teachers' test questions provided and evaluated" (Cazden, 1988, p.54).

Instructional Conversations

Instructional conversations (ICs) might be one way to achieve the ambitious but elusive goals long held by many thoughtful educators. ICs, as Tharp & Gallimore (1988) noted, involve something of a paradox. On the one hand, they are *instructional* in intent—they are designed to promote learning. On the other hand, they are *conversational* in quality—they appear to be natural and spontaneous language interactions, free from the didactic characteristics normally associated with formal teaching.

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On the surface, a good instructional conversation might appear as an excellent discussion conducted by a teacher and a group of students. It is interesting and engaging, about an idea or concept that has meaning and relevance for students. It has a focus that, while it might shift as the discussion evolves, remains discernible throughout. There is a high level of participation, without domination by any one individual, particularly the teacher. Students engage in extended discussions—conversations—with the teacher and among themselves.

Teachers and students are responsive to what others say, so that each statement or contribution builds upon, challenges, or extends a previous one. Both teacher and students present provocative ideas or experiences, to which others respond. Strategically, the teacher questions, prods, challenges, coaxes, or keeps quiet, providing clarification and instruction when necessary, without wasting time or words. The teacher assures that the discussion proceeds at an appropriate pace—neither too fast to prohibit the development of ideas, nor too slow to maintain interest and momentum. The teacher knows when to draw out a student's ideas and when to ease up, allowing thought and reflection to take over. Perhaps most important, the teacher manages to keep everyone engaged in a substantive and extended conversation, weaving individual participants' comments into a larger tapestry of meaning.

Many traditional forms of teaching (e.g., recitation, direct instruction) assume that the teacher's role is to help students learn what the teacher already knows. The teacher identifies learning goals for students, then systematically designs and employs lessons to reach them. This type of instruction essentially consists of having students acquire the goal(s) through the teachers' skillful use of, for example, modelling, step-by-step instructions, practice, and checking for understanding. The teacher generally looks for particular answers and expects little or no discussion.

ICs, on the other hand, are more in line with the shift toward a "constructivist" curriculum. Accordingly, students are expected to actively construct their own knowledge and understanding—by making connections, building mental schemata, and developing new concepts from previous understandings. The teacher plays the less directive, but no less deliberate, role of facilitator. An IC teacher does not provide step-by-step instruction designed to produce right answers or correct performance. Rather, the teacher encourages expression of students' own ideas, builds on information students provide, and generally guides students to increasingly sophisticated levels of comprehension.

Although good instructional conversations might appear to be spontaneous, they are not. They are pointed toward a learning objective or a goal by the teacher, who must be thoroughly acquainted with the text and the ideas under discussion, and with the many possibilities they offer for intellectual exploration, concept development, and construction of meaning with students. Emphasis is less on delivery of instruction and more on facilitating and guiding student understanding in the course of extended verbal

interactions. Sometimes, these interactions will lead in a direction the teacher had not anticipated, which does not normally happen with direct teaching.

A Model of Instructional Conversations

The writings of L.S. Vygotsky (1978) and his recent interpreters (e.g., Rogoff, 1990) have exerted an important influence on the development of an IC model in two distinct ways. First is Vygotsky's notion of a *zone of proximal development*, which lies between what a person can do independently (therefore, needing no instruction) and what he or she can do only with assistance. The goal of instruction is to move students from dependence to independence in a wide range of skills and problem-solving abilities. ICs should take place in the zone of proximal development, where children construct—with the assistance of a skilled teacher—understandings of important ideas, concepts, and texts they would otherwise not understand. Second is Vygotsky's idea that language is a primary vehicle for intellectual development. Language is not only a means for communicating information, it is also an important vehicle for helping learners broaden and deepen their understanding of important ideas.

A collaborative team of teachers and researchers developed an IC model (see Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991) based on their work in a low-income Southern California school district with a large language minority population and building upon earlier work in Hawaii (e.g., Au, 1979; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). The model evolved as teachers attempted to implement ICs in their classrooms and then reviewed and analyzed videotapes of their lessons. The elements of this model, shown below, are divided into two groups, instructional (#1-5) and conversational (#6-10). Both dimensions must be present for a good IC lesson to take place.

Elements of the Instructional Conversation

Instructional

1. *Thematic focus.* Teacher selects a theme on which to focus the discussion and has a general plan for how the theme will unfold, including how to "chunk" the text to permit optimal exploration of the theme.
2. *Activation and use of background and relevant schemata.* Teacher either "hooks into" or provides students with pertinent background knowledge and schemata necessary for understanding a text, weaving the information into the discussion.
3. *Direct teaching.* When necessary, teacher provides direct teaching of a skill or concept.
4. *Promotion of more complex language and expression.* Teacher elicits more extended student contributions by using a variety of elicitation techniques: invitations to expand, questions, restatements, and pauses.
5. *Promotion of bases for statements or positions.* Teacher promotes students' use of text, pictures, and reasoning to support an argument or position, by gently probing: "What makes you think that?" or "Show us where it says___."

Conversational

6. *Fewer "known-answer" questions.* Much of the discussion centers on questions for which there might be more than one correct answer.
7. *Responsiveness to student contributions.* While having an initial plan and maintaining the focus and coherence of the discussion, teacher is also responsive to students' statements and the opportunities they provide.
8. *Connected discourse.* The discussion is characterized by multiple, interactive, connected turns; succeeding utterances build upon and extend previous ones.
9. *Challenging, but non-threatening, atmosphere.* Teacher creates a challenging atmosphere that is balanced by a positive affective climate. Teacher is more collaborator than evaluator and students are challenged to negotiate and construct the meaning of the text.
10. *General participation, including self-selected turns.* Teacher does not hold exclusive right to determine who talks; students are encouraged to volunteer or otherwise influence the selection of speaking turns.

Conclusion

ICs appear to be particularly suited to certain educational goals, such as analysis of literary or historical themes, learning and understanding complex concepts, mathematical reasoning, applying quantitative understandings, considering various perspectives on issues, and oral or written composition.

The metaphor of weaving perhaps best captures the spirit of instructional conversations (cf. Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). First, a skilled teacher weaves together the comments and contributions made by different students with the ideas and concepts the teacher wishes to explore with them. Second, the teacher weaves students' prior knowledge and experiences with new knowledge and experiences, thereby broadening the scope of their understanding while building upon understandings they already possess. Finally, during the course of the conversation, the teacher weaves together, in appropriate proportions and shadings, the 10 IC elements. While particular elements can be picked out and identified—just as threads of different color can be picked out and identified on a cloth—instruction and conversation are woven into a seamless whole: the conversation is instructional, and the instruction is conversational.

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